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Developing the formal structures of artistic practice-as-research

A proposal for developing strategy and policy related to artistic research

Tag: Discipline

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Introduction

In this article I discuss a topic that is emerging as a valuable paradigm for creative practitioners - practice-as-research. There is some controversy over this term that, I believe, goes to the heart of our understanding of the nature of knowledge. The controversy relates to the idea that practice and research are two inherently different types of activity and therefore that it is impossible to engage in one 'as' the other. Tim Ingold's (2011) work on the anthropology of knowledge and skill alongside a broader stream of work on cognition and perception (see for example Lakoff & Johnson 2003 and Gibson 1979) suggests that both artistic practice and academic research involve 'puzzle-solving... carried on within the context of involvement in a real world of persons, objects and relations.' (Ingold 2011, p.419). The argument revolves around the notion that there is no such thing as disembodied or abstract knowledge and that all knowledge is both embodied and personally related to the world one inhabits. As such, the written word provides a schematic system for representing the much richer communication processes of speech and bodily experience. The written word, however, can only be understood through reference to our lived experience. Lave (1990, p.310) has termed this 'understanding in practice' as a knowledge 'based on rich expectations generated over time about its shape' (Lave 1990, p.323). Scholarly research outputs and their modes of publication are still firmly entrenched in the printed word. I will explore strategies for communicating the non-verbal knowledge that forms the basis of much practice-as-research.

Many of the proposals laid out in this article are also applicable to practice-as-research in other vocational disciplines but I will confine myself here to claims about artistic practice. Building upon Michael Polanyi's (1966) notion of tacit knowledge,

Christopher Frayling's (1993) 'research through practice' and Tim Ingold's (2013) ideas about doing-as-knowing, the aim is to establish a methodology that utilises video, audio and multi-media to create credible research outputs. The premise on which the argument is based is Borgdorff's definition of practice-as-research (which he more recently calls 'artistic research'):

Art practice qualifies as research if its purpose is to expand our knowledge and understanding by conducting an original investigation in and through art objects and creative processes. Art research begins by addressing questions that are pertinent in the research context and in the art world. Researchers employ experimental and hermeneutic methods that reveal and articulate the tacit knowledge that is situated and embodied in specific artworks and artistic processes. Research processes and outcomes are documented and disseminated in an appropriate manner to the research community and the wider public.

Borgdorff 2006: 18

However, while Borgdorff posits that the tacit knowledge can be 'situated and embodied' in the artwork itself as well as in the artistic process, I would argue that, in order for that tacit knowledge to be communicable, research outputs for practice-as-research should document, elucidate and evidence the creative process. If it is the 'practice' that is the object of the research then it is the practice that should be studied.

The theory

In the same way that research into a new drug cannot be evidenced by pointing out that you can get it in your local pharmacy, the art object does not constitute the research into the practice that made it, or the processes of interpretation through which it may be seen to embody knowledge. There may be, as Borgdorff suggests, 'tacit knowledge that is situated and embodied in specific artworks' (Borgdorff 2006, p.18) and for the purposes of research this tacit knowledge needs to be made both communicable and reproducible. This idea of process can be seen in the Research Excellence Framework definition of research:

For the purposes of the REF, research is defined as a process of investigation leading to new insights, effectively shared [...]. It includes [...] the invention and generation of ideas, images, performances, artefacts including design, where these lead to new or substantially improved insights.

(Higher Education Funding Council for England et al. 2011, p.71)

In laying down these criteria, the logical extension of this definition is to publish peer-reviewed outputs that are not artworks in themselves but are video, audio or multi-media presentations that convey the new and original tacit knowledge involved in an act of practice-as-research. This requires a clearly defined research question that, as Borgdorff points out, is 'pertinent in the research context and in the art world' (Borgdorff 2006, p.18). Artistic practice-as-research can involve questions such as 'how can I develop a creative technique or approach that allows me to express myself effectively through my work?'. This is a vital insight in the art world but it also requires the researcher to establish a set of criteria under which they can assess whether they have expressed themselves effectively or not. These criteria must necessarily constitute some kind of explicit or implicit theory about how this type of artwork affords or suggests particular types of interpretation. In this way, the artist/researcher can demonstrate through example how a particular technique or approach results in a particular set of physical attributes in the artwork. They can also demonstrate how these physical attributes afford some metaphorical or other mechanism, via their explicit or implicit theory, that affords or suggests a particular interpretation.

For myself, the theoretical model is drawn from the ecological approach to perception (Gibson, 1979) and embodied cognition (Lakoff and Johnson, 2003) and I have outlined this approach in relation to the study of record production in my previous work (Zagorski-Thomas, 2014). The important point, though, is not the specifics of the theoretical model but the fact that it should constitute a coherent and consistent basis for understanding how the artwork suggests potential for interpretation. Without this basis, anything that purports to be artistic practice-as-research is surely 'just' artistic practice. For a published research output, therefore, this process should be engaged with through a presentation that both identifies and communicates the nature of the tacit knowledge being used in the creative practice under scrutiny and that would allow it to be somehow tested or replicated.

Two examples

To explore these ideas in more detail I am going to use examples of practice-as-research engaged in by two of my PhD students at the London College of Music, UWL. The first is creating a series of multi-media artworks exploring the theme of female body image and the second is studying the techniques and processes of 1960s record production that helped to create the sound of psychedelic popular

music in the UK and the USA. Both of these students will be submitting theses in 2015 that include a substantial multi-media component.

Some of the first student's pieces involve the creation of fake skin by spreading and layering latex onto different surfaces and allowing it to dry, sometimes including text printed onto photographic film or fake blood in the process. The invariant properties that the work is aiming to invoke relate to gory images of human anatomy and, in the context within which they are displayed, to medical photographs of cosmetic surgery. This literal objectification of the female form, de-humanised through the suggestion of death and butchery, creates a wide range of further potential interpretive affordances. The experiments that the student conducted were sometimes recorded to video and others will be recreated on video to demonstrate the gradual process of exploring the material properties of the latex. Certain techniques, such as the embedding of text and images into the structure of the latex by using embossed Perspex, were accidental discoveries. Others, such as finding the right mix of 'blood' and 'skin', were more of a matter of systematic experimentation. Of course, the development of these techniques involves a combination of technical and aesthetic criteria being used in the evaluation process. On the one hand the student has certain requirements about the physical properties of the material: for example, that it is possible to stitch pieces of the latex skin together to create garments. On the other hand it has to look right and have the right texture. For this practice to constitute research, the researcher has to pick apart the process of identifying that 'rightness'. This may involve the comparison of various prototypes and experiments: perhaps based on their visual appearance but also, perhaps based on the way that they hang or move once they have been made into a garment. The assessment of these criteria will be examined as much by practical demonstrations as by verbal or written commentary.

The second student is exploring many of the instances of tacit knowledge that were implicit in the professional practice of sound engineers and musicians in the 1960s. This study is founded on understanding through the process of re-creating recorded psychedelic music from the 1960s. The process of re-creation requires the student to acquire event schemata that are similar to those acquired by the practitioners in the 1960s. Of course, in order for this to become a research process as opposed to a process of professional skill acquisition, the researcher needs to identify and communicate the nature of these schemata. This requires that the nature of the invariant properties and affordances of these various techniques are made explicit. The student also explores the forms of conceptual blending that suggest

metaphorical connections between these studio manipulations of the familiar sounds of popular music and psychedelia. In much the same way that the first student's practice-as-research can be divided into the practical and the metaphorical, this student has conducted practical experiments to, for example, discover and demonstrate performative tacit knowledge that technicians in various UK studios used to create the sound of tape phasing but has also discussed the metaphorical mechanism by which the sound of phasing became associated with psychedelia. Practical re-creations of iconic tracks, a form of reconstructive musical archaeology, have allowed the student to 'excavate' techniques that would otherwise have been lost.

Several times during these practice-as-research activities, the student discovered discrepancies and omissions between descriptions provided by industry professionals in interview and the physical possibilities afforded by the technology that they described using. These affordances and other aspects of the performative nature of using these technologies have been documented in an extensive series of videos that will constitute a substantial part of the thesis submission. Videos are used to highlight particular invariant properties and to demonstrate certain affordances. One such example is the ability to shape the sweep of tape phasing using the gestural control of a rotary knob to create a musically relevant shape. From the 1970s onwards when phasing effects were produced electronically and controlled by low frequency oscillators, the user could control the speed, the depth and sometimes also the shape of this regular oscillation; but the ability to create irregular gestural shapes that started and ended at the will of the 'performer' was lost. The newer technologies provided some affordances that were not available to earlier practitioners but they also removed other affordances. Documenting the 'losses' as well as the 'progress' through this process of re-creation not only allows practitioners better access to a wider range of potential affordances, but also demonstrates how product design also comes to reflect and influence the 'technological frame' (Pinch *et al.* 2012) – the perspective which frames the questions and problem-solving approaches that designers, manufacturers and users of particular forms of technology utilise. This process of 'excavation' through the documentation and analysis of practice allows the researcher a new perspective on these historical creative processes that was entirely unavailable in the previous language-based historical accounts.

Application

In many ways the consequences of this analysis are quite mundane. The 'special nature' of practice-as-research lies in the study of the practice and not in the artistic output. Kaila reminds us of the distinction between arts research, which is directed towards the art object, and artistic research, 'undertaken with [sic] the means of art' (Kaila, 2013: 115) , but also suggests that the output 'consists not only of text... but also of works of art' (Kaila, 2013: 115). . I would argue that the work of art is not an output of the research but part of the impact of the research. If I'm working in pharmaceutical research and I develop a cure for cancer, the research lies in discovering and communicating the process by which the drug works and how it can be constructed. If I'm working in artistic practice-as-research and I develop a work of art, the research lies in discovering and communicating the process by which the art 'works' and how it can be constructed. The 'how it can be constructed' element is obviously the practical element that I described above and, within my theoretical model, 'the process by which the art 'works'' is the metaphorical element - the mechanism through which conceptual blending and cross-domain mapping might suggest to an audience how to interpret the experience of the artistic output. I'm not proposing, by any means, that my theoretical model is the only way in which the 'working' of artistic outputs can be explained but I am proposing that some such explanation is a necessary condition of artistic practice-as-research. I am also proposing that a text-based analysis is not necessarily the best way of presenting this sort of explanation.

These alternatives to text can come in a variety of forms but creating video presentations that highlight particular features of an activity or use techniques such as hypothetical substitution to suggest which invariant properties afford which affordances for interpretation, form the basis for these multi-media templates. The ability to record and edit video on laptops, tablets and smart-phones has made the production of such outputs not much more difficult to master than the production of text-based documents in word processing software. In the same way that learning how to use a word-processor is not the same as learning to write an academic paper, an academic engaging in artistic practice-as-research needs to learn not just how to make videos but also how to structure them to communicate his/her ideas. Additionally, of course, video is not necessarily the best way to represent tacit knowledge about process in all forms of artistic practice-as-research; score-based musical composition and creative writing spring to mind as potential examples of exceptions. The point is not to proffer video outputs as a proposed replacement for

text-based outputs but as an alternative. Indeed the last event in a current AHRC project I am leading, will be a conference, partly 'face-to-face' and partly online, which includes a stream whereby academics involved in artistic practice-as-research from a variety of disciplines outside music can discuss the *pros* and *cons* of this kind of template for research outputs. An offshoot would be to establish a Journal of Practice-As-Research that would only accept submissions in a multi-media format, i.e. no text only papers, and which would involve a peer-review team of academic practitioners who would utilise the above mentioned criteria for judging the quality of the submissions.

Conclusion

Currently there is a lack of consistency across disciplines in the way researchers think about, present and evaluate practice-as-research. This can range from some instances in musical composition and fine art where the completed artefact may be presented without any form of exegesis, to instances, at the opposite end of the spectrum, where a practical process is subject to extensive textual analysis such that the embodied process and finished artefact are almost superfluous. This project aims to take a few initial steps on the road to consistency and to allow a more even-handed comparison between practice-as-research and more traditional text-based forms. In doing so, it will also take another important step in the development of academic publishing: demonstrating, suggesting and encouraging multi-media and video forms of output that go beyond being an appendix to a written text.

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